

## LATCHKEY CHILDREN: AT RISK IN URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS?

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### Introduction

Children, by their very nature, it seems, constitute a "population at risk." Either in observing children or in recalling our own childhood experiences, we can readily agree that it is close to miraculous that children do survive into adulthood.

The natural vulnerability of children provides at times a stark counterpoint to the realities children face in today's world. An earlier generation of children struggled with the effects of the Great Depression, while today's generation contends with a myriad of dilemmas essentially unknown a mere four decades ago. The post-World War II era unleashed powerful forces of change in many aspects of American life--from economics to social mores, to rapid changes in family life and employment patterns--to mention only a few.

### Background of the Latchkey Phenomenon

One phenomenon, emerging from the social upheaval that characterized the post war years in the U.S. is that of the "latchkey child." While latchkey children are not a totally new phenomenon, they have been catapulted into prominence as a social issue with the dramatic rise in the number of women and mothers in the workforce, as well as the equally dramatic changes in the American family that have taken place in the latter half of the twentieth century.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, in 1984 about 56% of the 58 million children under age 18 had mothers in the labor force, and 71% of employed mothers with children under 18 years of age worked full time. A record 6.2 million families with children were maintained solely by mothers and accounted for one-fifth of all families with children (Fact Sheet No. 85-4). Predictions indicate that these percentages will increase in the developing service economy of the 1990's.

Latchkey children are the children who care for themselves (i.e., without adult supervision) in the before- and after-school hours. Their numbers are becoming the focus of both popular debate and serious research. Information on the number of children in this situation has not been consistently well documented, thus inviting dissension over the available statistics and their interpretation. Estimates range from 2 to 6 million latchkey children.

Among the more commonly utilized resources for information are Census Bureau reports. The Current Population Report, issued in January, 1987, using data collected in the 1984 Current Population Survey, states that 25% (7.1 million) of school age children were reported to have spent some time after school unsupervised by a parent. Most of these children were supervised by another adult but about 30% (2.1 million) were in self- or non-adult care (p. 2).

The recent presidential campaign gave evidence of the increasing impact of child care and family-oriented issues on the national psyche. The impetus generated by that campaign continues as changes emerge in welfare, employee leave for child care responsibilities, day care financing and regulation issues.

As increasing numbers of women join the workforce, the care and supervision of latchkey children has become an issue for families, legislators, teachers, social work practitioners and children's policy analysts. It is an issue not without its own mix of controversy, including attitudes about mothers in the workforce, value systems regarding appropriate child-rearing practices and perceptions of the reasonable responsibilities children can assume for self-care.

Initial research efforts were actually concerned with the effects of maternal employment on children and can be regarded as the precursors of later studies which began to focus on the latchkey child per se. Studies concentrated predominantly on children's school performance (Galambos & Garbarino, 1985; Gold & Andres, 1978; Rodman, Pratto & Nelson, 1985; Woods, 1972) as well as the psychological and social adjustment aspects of children's experience (Galambos & Garbarino, 1985; Gold & Andres, 1978; Long & Long, 1982; Rodman, Pratto & Nelson, 1985; Steinberg, 1986).

More recently, several studies have begun to pursue the influence of environmental factors such as neighborhood and community settings (Galambos & Garbarino, 1985; Steinberg, 1986) on children who care for themselves in the after-school hours. This research project was in line with that effort. It was also exploratory in nature, because the accumulated wisdom on the subject of latchkey children is rudimentary at best.

The intention in undertaking this project was to explore if and how the after-school experience differs for the latchkey child in contrast to alternative forms of care, particularly with reference to children's experiences of fear, restrictions on neighborhood socializing activities and their sense of autonomy. Equally of interest was the effect of the "neighborhood" itself on these same variables.

In addition, this research was undertaken with a view towards contributing to the debate and formulation of policies related to the latchkey issue. If the research effort is still exploratory and tentative, the policy arena is even more so. Nonetheless, decisions will need to be made in the near future in regard to such matters as day care, the establishment of federal, state, and/or local initiatives for youth and community planning efforts. This is a critical time and definitely the place to be for social workers, be they planners or practitioners.

### Importance of Neighborhood

The neighborhood context of a child's experience is important not only for the latchkey child but for any child. Medrich, Roizen, Ruben & Buckley (1982) suggest that "neighborhood inequities" are especially important to children because they spend most of their out-of-school time relatively close to home. This situating of the child within his/her neighborhood sphere is actually an ecological perspective which emphasizes the interaction between person and environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

This perspective offered the most cogent paradigm for this study because its focus is the neighborhood context of the after-school and self-care experience. The ecological perspective has the advantage of viewing individuals and their environments as mutually shaping systems. Thus, the ecological model's schema of interacting social systems served well as a theoretical model for the study, for the

quality of children's life experiences are determined by their sociological and physical ecologies.

The ecological perspective also makes use of a construct known as "environmental press" to develop its theory. Garbarino (1982) states that "environmental press is the combined influence of forces working in a setting to shape the behavior and development of people in that setting" (p. 3). For school-aged children, school and neighborhood are part of their environmental press. Furthermore, neighborhood can be a pivotal influence in the shaping of a child's behavior, attitudes and development. As Medrich et al. (1982) point out:

For children the neighborhood is more than a geographical setting. It is a social universe. Since children are only minimally mobile, the things they do from day to day are in part, shaped by the nature of the physical environment in which they live. (p. 33)

#### Definition of Neighborhood

In this particular study, neighborhood was operationally defined as one of 76 specific Chicago community areas as designated by the U.S. Census Bureau, and secondly by census tracts within the community area from which the particular school population participating in this study was drawn. Using this definition, a number of facts pertinent to the area could be established, such as average family income, racial distribution, and crime statistics.

While this definition allowed for objective data-gathering, there are other factors to be taken into consideration, one of these being the residents' own assessment of their neighborhood. These perceptions, while subjective, are critical when it comes to determining the quality of life in the neighborhood as residents experience it. McCready (1987) remarks that while traditional "social indicator" studies have concentrated on objective measures such as unemployment rates and crime statistics, another set of indicators, equally important, are those which refer to the perceptions of the "quality of life" held by community residents. These subjective perceptions, in tandem with objective indicators, are important components in assessing the experiences and behavior patterns of neighborhood residents. These perceptions are also what are transmitted to children by means of particular "ground rules" or restrictions they are to observe as children

living in a particular neighborhood. Children's experiences of fear and restrictions are thus embedded in this mix of both the objective and subjective indicators of neighborhood quality of life.

#### Dependent Variables of the Study

~~The three dependent variables of this study--fear, restrictions, and autonomy--are composite or index variables, each consisting of several items pertinent to the composite. These variables were chosen because of their frequent association with the latchkey controversy and their occurrence in the research literature.~~

The index variable of fear included items such as fear of the child's house being broken into, being scared when home alone, and fear of strange noises.

The variable of restrictions included items dealing with neighborhood mobility such as being allowed to play outside, being allowed to go over to a friend's house or having a friend over to the house.

Autonomy referred to children's sense of feeling grown-up and of being able to do whatever they want when they are home alone.

#### Methodology

Methodology for this study centered around having children themselves as respondents, rather than parents or teachers. A survey format was adopted as the most appropriate means of collecting data for the study, considering the age range (8 to 11 years) to be involved, and the setting (classroom) in which the data was to be collected. This necessitated some creative adaptation of traditional survey methodologies because very few questionnaires have been developed for use with a population this young.

A two part survey format was devised, the first part dealing with basic demographic information. The second part contained a series of questions built around variables considered to be characteristic of the after-school as well as self-care experience. The question items were developed around themes elicited from the research literature or considered to have a bearing on the latchkey experience.

They included themes which incorporated the dependent variables of the study: experiences of fear and perceptions of neighborhood safety, physical restrictions on socializing activities, and sense of autonomy.

The questions were presented in vignette style, describing a child in a particular situation and then asking the readers if they ever felt the same way. Children could choose from among three forced-choice responses to each statement. In order that the children's responses would be as reliable as possible, questions were kept concrete and distinctions that may be confusing for children of this age range were kept to a minimum. The survey was then administered to third, fourth and fifth grade children at three parochial elementary schools in three Chicago urban neighborhoods.

The 8- to 11-year age range was selected because the literature on latchkey children cites this age range as the "watershed" time when decisions about allowing a child to assume self-care responsibilities are most commonly made.

All three schools involved in the study are located in working class neighborhoods. St. Robert school is located in a white, ethnic neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago: Portage Park and adjacent Jefferson Park. The other two schools are located in black neighborhoods on Chicago's southeast side: St. Joachim in Chatham and the other, Gate of Heaven, in South Deering.

Average income levels for each neighborhood (as defined by the census tracts from which the particular school population was drawn) were ascertained from 1980 census tract data. While income ranges varied somewhat, these three neighborhoods could readily be regarded as working class and were selected with this criterion in mind. Because parents themselves were not directly involved in the survey, information about income, per se, was not obtained. However, because this could be an influential factor in children's response to certain questions or in parents' decisions regarding child care options, some control over this variable was deemed desirable. The study was thus limited to the working class urban neighborhood, as distinct from a ghetto, affluent or suburban neighborhood.

Parochial schools were used because of the relative ease of access for permissions and authorizations and because this was not seen as problematic for the research

concerned, i.e.: the "representativeness" of children in an urban environment. In addition, these three schools had the particular advantage of being "neighborhood" schools with nearly all of the student population being drawn from within the specific neighborhood community in which the school was located. Thus, both the schools and the children attending them were intrinsic to and representative of their neighborhood. "School" became the proxy for the "neighborhood" variable in the study.

All children in grades three through five who returned permission forms participated in the survey regardless of supervisory status. Children not in a self-care situation served as the comparison group.

The total sample included 200 children. One hundred eleven children were from St. Robert School, 42 from St. Joachim, and 47 from Gate of Heaven. This represented an average response rate of 71%. By race, 111 children were white and 89 were black. By sex, 103 were boys and 97 were girls. Eighteen of the 200 children surveyed (9%) qualified as latchkey children. Latchkey children for purposes of this study were those children home alone for some period of time during the after-school hours, though not necessarily on a daily basis. This is, of course, an arbitrary designation, but usage has made it a common one.

The study examined the following questions:

1. Do latchkey children differ from other children in regard to their experience of fear, restrictions, and sense of autonomy?
2. Do children's experiences of fear, restrictions, and autonomy, particularly those of latchkey children, differ according to neighborhood?
3. Is there an interactive effect between latchkey status and neighborhood on children's experiences of fear, restrictions, and autonomy?
4. Do children's age or sex influence these experiences?

Eight dependent variables were utilized to test children's experiences of fear, restrictions, and autonomy. These were cross-tabulated with four independent variables: latchkey status, school (proxy for neighborhood), age, and sex.

Following this preliminary analysis using chi-square, the variables were grouped to form three index variables: "fear," "restrictions," and "autonomy." Using factorial analysis of variance, the relationships between the dependent index variables and the independent variables of latchkey status and neighborhood were examined. Age and sex were dropped at this stage because the preliminary analysis did not uncover statistically significant differences for these variables. Analysis of variance was chosen because the index variables were regarded as interval data.

### Data Analysis

Analysis of variance did not reveal a statistically significant effect for latchkey status on the dependent index variable of fear. Latchkey children as a whole therefore did not exhibit significantly more fearfulness than their peers on this composite index.

The main effect for school (proxy for neighborhood) however, did reveal statistical significance ( $F = 2.41$ ,  $p = .09$ ), using .10 as the level of significance. St. Robert School children as a whole displayed the least amount of fear and St. Joachim School children the most, indicating that levels of fear do vary from neighborhood to neighborhood. There was no significant interaction between the effects of latchkey status and school.

The results were more complex in regard to restrictions on neighborhood activities. With all three schools in the analysis, there was no statistically significant difference between latchkey children and all other children. When the two black schools were combined in an analysis of variance, significance of the main effect for latchkey status remained basically the same, while that of school took on statistical significance ( $F = 71.21$ ,  $p = .00$ ), and the interactive effect of latchkey status and school was statistically significant ( $F = 2.94$ ,  $p = .09$ ).

However, when St. Robert School was dropped from the analysis, using only the two black schools, latchkey status was statistically significant ( $F = 3.45$ ,  $p = .07$ ), but there was no significant main effect for school, nor was there a statistically significant interactive effect. A one-way analysis of variance for St. Robert School revealed no statistical significance for latchkey status. This process indicated that the two black schools or neighborhoods were



similar, and that within these two neighborhoods latchkey children were indeed more restricted in their activities.

In contrast to the lack of statistical significance for latchkey status when all three schools were utilized in the analysis, the main effect for school/neighborhood did reveal statistical significance ( $F = 36.09$ ,  $p = .0$ ). St. Robert School displayed the highest mean, indicating that these children experienced the least amount of restrictions on neighborhood activities. Thus, children's experiences of restrictions varied significantly by neighborhood. The analysis utilizing all three schools did not reveal a statistically significant interaction between the effects of latchkey status and neighborhood on restrictions.

On the third and final variable, latchkey children did display a statistically significant stronger sense of autonomy ( $F = 21.85$ ,  $p = .00$ ) than did their peers and this was apparent regardless of neighborhood.

Table 1

Analyses of Variance Results

Independent Variables	Latchkey		School	
	F	Sig	F	Sig
Dependent Variables				
Fear	1.48	.22	2.41	.09*
Restrictions	2.28	.13	36.09	.0*
Autonomy	21.85	.00*	1.34	.26

Note. Analyses include all three schools

\* Significant at .10 level

Discussion

Fear, restrictions, and autonomy were each affected differentially by latchkey status and also by neighborhood. The latchkey children in this study did not exhibit statistically significant levels of fear in contrast to their peers, contrary to what might be expected. This is not to dismiss its importance. Rather, some fear seems to be characteristic of all children today. The presumption

that children home alone are more fearful than their peers may reflect an adult bias. For children in the latter half of the twentieth century, this may be just one fear among many others. The pervasive effects of fear in general may produce a masking effect for particular fears. However, school or neighborhood did display statistical significance in relation to fear, indicating the influence of the child's environment.

A more complex association was evident in regard to restrictions on socializing activities within the neighborhood. There was a statistically significant effect for latchkey status only when the two black schools were used, indicating that latchkey children in these two neighborhoods were more restricted in regard to socializing activities. Furthermore, there was a statistically significant effect for neighborhood when all three schools were used in the analysis.

While there are a number of plausible explanations for these findings, one intuitive connection that arises in observing the pattern of these children's experiences of restrictions is that of the incidence of neighborhood crime. While the incidence of crime in all three neighborhoods indicated more similarities than differences, the children in both black schools live in neighborhoods more permeable to crime than those of St. Robert school. The two black neighborhoods abut high crime neighborhoods whereas St. Robert's is located in a neighborhood further removed from the poverty areas of the city as well as other components of deterioration, thus shielding it from some sources of crime.

These analyses of variance results suggest that it may be more profitable to pursue aspects of this construct of restrictions rather than elements related to the construct of fear, particularly for refining differences between latchkey children and those who are not, and for tracing differences among children in various urban neighborhoods. Fear is experienced not just by children home alone, but rather is something common to all children, whereas restrictions on behaviors are experienced differentially.

For children taking care of themselves after school and also living in a neighborhood that tends to have more restrictions for all children, the after-school experience could prove to be even more isolating and inhibiting in regard to normal childhood and neighborhood activities.

Neither parent nor child can so easily escape the realities a particular neighborhood may impose. Thus, while it may be quite appropriate as well as necessary in some neighborhoods for parents to restrict children's activities, particularly for those home alone after school, the consequences of these kinds of choices need to be explored more thoroughly. A judgment is not made here in regard to the positives or negatives of restrictions. The reasons for these particular restrictions and how they may be related to safety concerns or other concerns would be more to the point.

Latchkey children do differ significantly from their peers in regard to autonomy, expressing more of a sense of autonomy. Most of the other children did not share this sense. This result may be implicit in the home alone status in much the same way as children home alone did not want to admit to being scared "a lot of the time." While some children who are home alone may genuinely feel a sense of autonomy, it is possible that this may be a coping mechanism for others. Parents may express to the child that he or she is grown-up enough to handle the self-care experience and the child internalizes this message. There is a keen sense of wishing to live up to expectations.

Before proceeding further with implications of these findings, the limitations of this study should be addressed. The scope of the study was small, encompassing three neighborhoods of a very large metropolitan area. A broader study encompassing more neighborhoods as well as a greater number of children would increase the accuracy of the results. The children were not randomly selected; therefore, results cannot be generalized to another location. Nonetheless, the results can offer direction for future research efforts.

The definition of latchkey status also has inherent difficulties. Children tend to move in and out of various supervisory arrangements rather than remaining in one fixed arrangement. While this complicates the task of defining who is legitimately a latchkey child, it is also indicative of the nature of the problem: categories are fluid and complex and thus definitions vary. Supervisory arrangements may change from day to day and while some children have access to adult supervision, others do not. Stationary categories are difficult to come by, thus rendering even this rudimentary data elusive.

While pre-testing provided some measure of internal reliability, the survey instrument has not been utilized with other populations. Over and above this is the question of the reliability of responses of children, though researchers have probably underestimated their ability to respond accurately to questions pertaining to their own experience (Zill, Peterson & Moore, 1984). Content validity of the instrument was addressed by pre-testing as well as by having several teachers of the pertinent grade levels review the questionnaire.

### Implications of the Study

What implications can be drawn from this study? Are latchkey children at risk in urban neighborhoods? What is the nature of these risks? Do these neighborhoods harbor particular hazards or perhaps provide unanticipated benefits?

It was noted that in two of the neighborhoods studied, children were more restricted in their neighborhood activities. Whether this was the result of parental concerns about safety or even directly related to the incidence of crime in the neighborhood itself or adjacent neighborhoods would take another study. But the restrictions are there and bear further investigation. And while restrictions may reduce one form of risk, they may pose another--such as that of increased social isolation.

Urban neighborhoods have some unanticipated benefits as well, however. In all three neighborhoods studied, a sizeable number of children had extended family such as grandparents, aunts and uncles living in the household. The white children were of ethnic backgrounds, predominantly Polish, Irish and Italian, where extended families are still strong and the children themselves are in many instances only second or third generation Americans. In the case of the children from the black community also, "family" has always meant more than the normative nuclear family (Stack, 1974). In addition, these neighborhoods are more densely populated than suburban areas tend to be. Thus, children's access to these kinship networks existing within urban neighborhoods may offset some of the apparent risks. This may have accounted for the fact that the proportion of latchkey children in these neighborhoods was lower than expected. These networks, because they are based on physical proximity, tend to break down as families migrate to suburban areas.

Risk also deals with probability and potential. When significant numbers of latchkey children are juxtaposed with increasing urban environmental hazards such as crime, gang activity and drug usage which are no longer confined to inner city neighborhoods, the potential for serious consequences is evident.

In addition, the long-term effects of children in self-care have yet to be determined. Will children who have been accustomed to long periods of time on their own be more prone to risk-taking behaviors? A recent study indicates this may be the case in regard to substance abuse and that the risk cuts across all socio-economic levels within the urban environment (Richardson, et al., 1989).

It is perhaps more accurate to describe the latchkey situation as a harbinger of other more serious social concerns. While latchkey children--per se--may not be a problem, their vulnerability particularly within the urban environment, is cause for concern and therefore points to a practical focus for practice and public policy initiatives.

#### Implications for Social Work Practice

An appropriate social work role in view of the foregoing discussion would seem to be one of advocacy. School and neighborhood-based programs easily accessible to parents and children of a particular neighborhood need to be encouraged and implemented. Local schools, community centers and church sponsored programs also add credibility as well as some element of community control. A social work presence would prove a valuable asset on action committees or community boards.

The Ohio General Assembly for instance, recently passed a bill (H.B. 69; March, 1987) that provides funding for school-based latchkey programs. Introducing latchkey programs into local community planning and priority efforts also calls for the expertise of social workers. Lipsitz (1986) stresses that endorsing, enabling and requiring the use of school buildings for after-school programs removes a significant policy barrier to service delivery, and is one of the most frequently and successfully argued policy changes at the municipal and state levels. Locally viable programs will be the result of the degree of investment and cooperation provided by local citizens, parents, educators, social service organizations, businesses and municipal leadership.

School social workers in particular can alert staff to school-based awareness and safety programs designed for latchkey children and their parents. They should also have firsthand knowledge of the neighborhood in which their school is located, such as its parks, shopping districts, library, and gathering places frequented by teens. A valuable contribution can be made by networking with youth-oriented programs in the community such as Boys Clubs, Scouts, and organized sports programs to provide supervised alternatives for children on their own after school.

Finally, social workers can be active in policy development on the local and national levels as it touches the many facets of the latchkey situation: women and mothers in the workforce, corporate sponsorship of day-care and after-school programs, flexible working hours for parents of school age children, youth initiatives and participation on planning and priority boards.

Latchkey children are here to stay. Understanding the issues that surround their circumstances will be of benefit to anyone concerned with the welfare of America's children.

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